

*'Sent down? Called up?': Exploring the roller coaster of loans and re-assignments in  
professional hockey*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Applied Health Sciences (Kinesiology)

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### Abstract

Athletes constantly face transitions in their sporting career, which can influence the quality of their performance and well-being. The purpose of the study is to explore professional hockey players' lived experiences with being called up and sent down in organizations. For example, an athlete can play in the National Hockey League (NHL) and is then sent down to their affiliated team in the American Hockey League (AHL) for a variety of reasons. The study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand athletes lived experiences with being called up and sent down, this allowed the researcher to move beyond brief descriptions toward understanding this specific transition athletes face. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, which occurred with six current hockey players (five current professional athletes and one competitive athlete). Data-analysis followed a two-phase process analysis to determine themes and patterns within each interview and then compared patterns across interviews to see what is common across interviews. The results were presented in three clusters such as the performance and well-being of an athlete, external influences on career, and interpretations of experiences. Further research is needed to explore the impact that loaning can have on an athlete and their well-being.

### Acknowledgements

This accomplishment is not possible without a strong support system behind me. I'd like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Philip Sullivan, for giving me the autonomy throughout my research the past two years. Your insights and guidance in research and consulting enhanced my experience of graduate school and helped me grow as an individual. You allowed me to choose how I wish to experience my master's degree; I am truly appreciative of that!

Next I would like to thank Dr. Maureen Connolly; you took an interest in what I was passionate about and you opened my eyes up to the power of phenomenology. I always enjoyed our rants or venting about different topics during our meetings, thank you for all your support. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee, Dr. Jill Tracey and Dr. Mark Bruner, both of you gave me valuable insight to research and made it clear how much of an impact I can have on the future of hockey, thank you!

I'd like to thank my parents for the endless support and love all you have given me over this lengthy journey of post-secondary school. This accomplishment would not have happened without it and I am truly grateful to have such a great support system at home, including my brothers, I guess. Now at family functions it will be very clear who the smartest McLaughlin is, enjoy the backseat on that one Brendan and Michael. I also want to thank my sister-in-law, Natalie, for always showing interest in my research and helping me become a better presenter. I would also like to thank my closest buddies for their endless support no matter what I do and allowing me to vent about sport psychology. It's been inspiring to see each of you accomplish your goals and in turn it helped me along the way.

I'd like to thank a few of my mentors along my academic journey so far. I'd like to my undergraduate supervisor, Dr. Jessica Fraser-Thomas, for opening my eyes to how great research

is and always taking the time to meet with me when I know you were way too busy. Your support throughout my undergraduate thesis and helping me figure out my path to graduate school was much appreciated, and I can't thank you enough! I'd like to thank my high school teacher, Mrs. Harshman, you always showed you cared about what I was going to do with my life, and I always felt I could come to you with any of my problems that I was facing. I don't think I would be here in my academic journey without your support and I just wanted to thank you for helping me along the way!

Lastly, I would like to extend a big thank you to the participants of my research. Thank you for allowing me inside your world of professional hockey and expressing your experiences with me, I can't thank you enough for taking the time out of your busy lives, this research could not have happened without you. I wish each of you nothing but the best in your future of hockey and life!

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## Chapter One: Literature Review

### Transitions

Transitions are common for individuals as they progress through life. Schlossberg (1981) stated transitions are, “an event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (p. 5). This definition applies to normal transitions such as employment, schooling, and marriage, or even non-normal transitions such as natural disasters or termination of a job. Non-normal transitions are unanticipated transitions that individuals may experience where normal transitions are the opposite they are expected and anticipated.

### Sport-Career Transitions

In regard to sport-career transitions, Bloom (1985) recognized that talent development within the area of science, art, and sport occurs across three different stages. These specific stages begin with the (a) *initiation* stage where young athletes are introduced to the organized sport and considered to be a talented athlete; (b) transition into the *developmental* stage where an athlete begins to devote more time towards their craft and limits external distractions or activities to focus solely on their specialization; (c) transition into the *mastery or perfection* stage where an individual has become intrinsically motivated to master their craft and be athletically proficient. These transitions athletes experience towards athletic development (initiation, developmental, and mastery) can be understood as normative transitions. According to the athletic transition literature, there are two types of transitions: normative and non-normative transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Sharf, 1997). Normative transitions are anticipated, predictable, and tend to occur when an individual progresses through one stage and enters a new stage, which for athletes can be described as when an athlete goes from junior to senior level athletics (i.e., within-career

transition and career termination; Morris, Tod, & Eubank, 2017; Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017). Non-normative transitions are unanticipated and unpredictable events in an individual's life, which for athletes can be described as a season-ending injury or being deselected from their team (i.e., career termination or within-career transition; Agnew, Marks, Henderson, & Woods, 2018; Blakelock, Chen, & Prescott, 2016).

Transitions that athletes experience are not mutually exclusive to the athletic context. Athletes can experience transitions at a psychological, psychosocial, academic and vocational, financial and legal levels while experiencing transitions within a performance context. For example, athletes attempting to transition into the mastery or perfection stage of athletic performance – where an individual has become intrinsically motivated to master their craft – need to consistently perform for as long as possible while potentially coping with transitional changes on a psychological level (i.e., adolescence into young adulthood), at a psychosocial level (development of temporary/stable relationships with a partner), and academic or vocational level (transitioning into higher education or a professional occupation) (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The more time and effort an athlete contribute towards their chosen sport, the more likely they are to develop an athletic identity. An athletic identity presents both positive and negative outcomes for an athlete. In this process of defining ones athletic identity, an athlete may experience identity foreclosure, which means they avoid engaging in exploratory behaviours outside of the athletic role due to the time commitment required for sport participation (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Identity foreclosure poses many difficulties for athletes in transition as Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2013) noted that “a strong athletic identity and high tendency towards identity foreclosure were negatively associated with the quality of athletes' career transition” (p. 33).

### **Transition Frameworks and Models**

Individuals experience transitions differently as there are several factors which determine the quality of a transition. Schlossberg (1981, 1984) suggests three factors interact to influence a transition; perception of particular transition, characteristics of pre- and post-transition environment, and characteristics of the individual. The aspects that influence the perception of transition include role change, source of transition, timing, type of transition (gradual or sudden) and duration. The pre- and post-transition environmental factors include internal support systems, institutional support and physical setting. The variables of individuals that influence a transition include characteristics such as psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation and prior experience with a similar transition. Although this definition explores transitions in an individual's life transition, researchers apply this definition to the sport psychology field to understand athletic career transitions (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2008). This framework was later expanded by Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) to include four key factors that influence a transition, which is the four S's: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. The situation refers to four contexts of a transition such as *trigger*, reveals what activated the transition and was it anticipated or not; *timing*, how does this relate to an individual's social clock; *control*, what areas of the transition does the individual have control over; *stress*, the amount of stress the individual faces from the athletic transition and other facets of life. The self relates to the characteristics and psychological resources an individual has that may influence the transition. The support refers to the amount of support an individual has during a transition in three different forms: (1) instrumental support – tangible support to assist an athlete; (2) informational support – providing relevant information to help the young athlete manage the

transition; (3) emotional support – providing reassurance or empathy towards an athlete. The strategies refer to an evaluation of the strategies an individual can use to assist in a successful adapt to a transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

Stambulova et al. (2017) developed a four-phase empirical model for athletes to progress to a senior level of competition in Swedish hockey. The four-phase empirical model consists of: preparation phase, orientation phase, adaption phase, and stabilization phase. The preparation and orientation phase occurred when an athlete developed physically and mentally to perform at the senior level yet experiencing similar difficulties that Bruner et al.'s (2008) hockey players experienced (team norms, physique, team roles). As athletes continue to progress, they encounter the adaptation phase where they gain more experience playing at the senior level and begin to set into their role on the team. The final phase of stabilization is where an athlete continues to play at the senior level consistently and where his or her nonathletic obligations begin to increase (i.e., academic) (Stambulova et al., 2017). This four-phase empirical model is challenging to generalize across all professional hockey organizations in the world as well as different sports, yet it has some generalizable factors such as the development of on-ice and off-ice performance, mental and physical development factors.

Adaptation to transitions plays a major role in an athlete's career trajectory; if he/she does not adapt successfully (i.e., a new role on a team), the future of that athletes' career may be in jeopardy. Adaptation is how people "understand their surroundings and [within these learn to] function competently" (Fiske, 2004, p. 25). Fiske (2004) acknowledged that there are five pathways for adaptation for individuals such as understanding, controlling, self-enhancement, belonging, and trusting. For individuals, understanding relates to meaning and through this pathway, individuals are to make sense of their current environment. Following understanding,

controlling is associated with mastery, once an individual has sufficient knowledge of a task or event, they tend to make better decisions. Through self-enhancement, individuals are sought out to develop and improve their self-esteem while also developing the proper skills needed for performance. Through belonging, individuals are to cooperate with others, whereas through trusting, individuals are to use social support to assist with personal challenges (Fiske, 2004).

Similar to Fiske (2004), athletes in Stambulova et al.'s (2017) research need to progress through each pathway in order to play at the senior level. Battocchio, Schinke, Battocchio, Halliwell, and Tenenbaum (2010) studied the adaptation process of National Hockey League (NHL) players through interviewing prospects, rookies, veterans, and retirees. Their findings were consistent with Fiske's (2004) adaption pathways (i.e., understanding, controlling, self-enhancement, belonging, and trusting) and also, they were able to discover three novel sub-strategies such as understanding one's performance, distraction control, and trusting player agents. All groups found it essential to understand one's performance to determine where they fit within the team structure. The distraction control sub-strategy assists athletes in blocking out irrelevant media to focus on performance-relevant information as well as trusting player agents to handle responsibilities and overseeing client's finances. Depending on the athlete and their current career stage determines which specific sub-strategy they favor. For example, the prospect group was competing for NHL roster spots, in which their sub-strategies are more on improving athletic ability, compared to the rookie group that acknowledges team members for support and assistance in avoiding demotions (Battocchio et al., 2010).

### **Factors Influencing Sport-Career Transition**

There are many factors that play a role in an athlete's perception and adaption to a transition such as an athlete's athletic identity, preparation and coping abilities, control over a given situation, and social support throughout this transition.

Factors that have the ability to influence the quality of transition within the psychological and psychosocial category are an athlete's athletic identity, coping styles, control, and social support. Athletic identity is defined as the notion that an individual will define themselves within the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Having a strong athletic identity can pose positive and negative consequences for an athlete. An athlete that exclusively perceives themselves within the athletic role can experience benefits such as a salient sense of self, positive effects on athletic performance, and a greater adherence to sport and exercise long term (Sparkes, 2000), but there tends to be more negative implications for athletes. A strong athletic identity means an athlete limits the time spent in other venues of identity development outside of the athletic context such as school or career development, which places an athlete at risk for negative implications such as a loss of identity during retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007) and burnout (Gustafsson, Kentta, Hassmen, Lundqvist, & Durand-Bush, 2007).

The control an athlete has over a transition can determine if the transition is a positive or negative experience. In Nicholls and Polman (2007) systematic review, they discuss athletes coping styles, i.e. being problem-focused (e.g., actively change the threat), emotion-focused (e.g., overcome emotional disturbance that is associated with threat), and avoidance coping (e.g., removing oneself, physically and mentally, from the threat). If an athlete experiences a non-normative transition such as a trade without anticipation, this can present more negative implications for that athlete, as opposed to if an athlete anticipates transitioning from the junior-to-senior level or has planned for retirement. This supports Lally's (2007) findings on coping

strategies athletes approaching retirement experience. The athlete's pursuing a proactive approach (i.e., talking to former teammates about their experience with retirement and how to prepare for it) towards retirement experience fewer negative effects (e.g., avoid/ diminish identity crisis and emotional impact).

Social networks play an influential role in an athlete's ability to excel within a career transition. Social support can be interpreted many ways, but Murphy (2009) introduced five types of social support such as *emotional* support, where others provide comfort, reassurance and love to an individual; *tangible* support is where an individual is in need of direct assistance for things such as achieving deadlines; *informational* support where an individual may receive advice or guidance on how to cope with an encounter; *esteem* support is where an individual is acknowledged for their work and tends to increase confidence; and *network* support is the sense of belonging to a group of similar interests. Each type of social support may have positive or negative effects on an athlete within transition. Whether the athlete is transitioning into an elite sport or they are retiring from a sport they have given their entire life to, both transitions are in need of social support as it has been a consistent theme within career transition literature (Bruner et al., 2008; Pummel et al., 2008).

### **Within-Career Transitions**

There are a number of within-career transitions athletes will experience throughout their careers ranging from the entrance into elite sport, being deselected from a team, and being traded to an opposing team.

**Entry Into Elite Sport.** An area of research that has gained popularity over the last decade has been athlete's normative transitions into elite sport. This is where an athlete will transition from junior level to senior level sport or from amateur to professional. This particular

transition can be difficult for some athletes. Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, and Wylleman (2004) found that only 17% of athletes were able to cope with the transition from elite youth to elite senior level status. This large sample of unsuccessful athletes helps highlight how difficult this specific transition can be for athletes. For athletes that make a successful transition into elite sport, MacNamara, Button, and Collins (2010a; 2010b) identified those psychological characteristics such as commitment, competitiveness, vision, self-belief, and imagery assist with a successful transition into elite sport.

Morris et al. (2017) explored the experiences and changes occurring during a youth soccer athletes' transition from the youth-to-senior level team (i.e., first team). They discovered that prior to transitioning upwards athletes reported high levels of motivation to be successful yet a sense of anxiousness, which can stem from a variety of factors (i.e., parental pressure, internal pressure, social support). After transitioning to the senior level these athletes were less anxious and more confident about their skill level (Morris et al., 2017). This can be interpretable via Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which people's self-efficacy improves through mastery experiences (i.e., performing well on the senior-level team). Transitions tend to be individualistic as some athletes may be able to handle a transition better than others due to many factors such as increased social support where others may experience an increase in the parental influence that may not be beneficial.

Bruner et al. (2008) investigated rookie ice-hockey players' experiences transitioning into elite sport, in this case, entering Major Junior 'A' hockey organizations. These athletes age range from 16 to 18 years old, which two themes emerged in relation to on-ice issues (e.g., performance-related) and off-ice issues (e.g., relationships and personal development related). On-ice issues are those rookie athletes being ready and displaying competence in ability to

compete at an elite level, earning playing time, evaluation of performance (outcome goals such as point production), and coaches' comments in support of rookie athletes. Off-ice issues such as the role of teammates in regards to social support, athlete's experience of billets (i.e., hosting family for an athlete moving away from home with their family), player trades, and an athlete's personal development (Bruner et al., 2008). This study highlights how athletes at a developmental age may struggle with transitioning into elite sport and assist in understanding how transitioning into elite sport can involve more than just a performance factor.

**Deselection.** Being deselected from a team can present a negative experience for athletes ranging from performance decrements to psychological distress and possible withdrawal from sport. Depending on the individual and the given context, the transition can be a normative or non-normative transition. If the athlete is beginning to receive decrements in playing time or responsibility on a team this can be a sign of potential deselection but if the athlete experiences no warning signs this is a non-normative transition. This type of transition begins in the youth sporting context such as a study by Blakelock et al. (2016) who examined elite adolescent soccer players experiencing clinical levels of psychological distress following the team selection process. They found that deselected soccer players experience higher levels of psychological distress such as symptoms of depression, anxiety, loss of confidence, and social dysfunction, which may ultimately hinder performance as opposed to players that remain on the team. This can be the beginning of a vicious cycle for some athletes experiencing identity foreclosure. Although this study was limited to soccer players, the psychological distress these athletes experience applies to other sports since deselection is not limited to one sport. Brown and Potrac (2009) investigated former elite soccer careers that ended prematurely from deselection and found that a portion of athletes expressed that their strong athletic identity was the main

contributor to the emotional and psychological disturbances upon deselection. The psychological distress after deselection also exposes these athletes to the possibility of decreasing their health and wellbeing (Moussavi, Chatterji, Verdes, Tandon, Patel & Ustun, 2007).

**Trades.** Trades involve a transaction between two or more teams; one athlete switches teams for another athlete on an opposing team. This can also be a normative or non-normative transition for an athlete depending on the context. An athlete may be expecting a trade (i.e., normative) if they have asked their current team for this or have begun to experience a reduction in playing time. A non-normative transition can be where an athlete is abruptly traded (i.e., non-normative) without any prior knowledge or anticipation.

Acquiring such a particular sample of athletes traded can be difficult for researchers as this area of sport psychology is limited to a number of studies. Nicholson, McTeer, and White (1998) used archival data on performance markers of major league baseball players from 1970 to 1989 in order to examine the effects of athletes changing teams. They examined both pitchers and hitters traded mid-season and between seasons due to a decrease in performance. The findings showed that athletes traded mid-season showed significant improvements with their new teams from previous performance markers, as well as athletes traded between seasons, enjoyed better years with new teams, but minimal improvements in performance following the trade. Although this study does highlight quantifiable increases in performance, it fails to acknowledge qualitative differences in athletes' efficacy in their chosen sport (i.e., baseball). Similarly, Wanic, Goldschmied, and Nolan (2018) supported the findings that athletes traded mid-season show significant performance increases.

**Migration.** When an athlete experiences a non-ideal work options within their given environment, they are sometimes given options to migrate to a new country with new norms to

excel in. This process can be a result of both deselection and or a trade that leaves an athlete to contemplate career termination or to migrate towards new sporting environments. In the context of professional hockey in North America, many players will explore options in European leagues such as Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), Elitserien (Swedish Elite League 'SEL'), or Deutsche Eishockey Liga (DEL). Agergaard and Ryba (2014) interviewed professional female soccer transnational athletes and identified their findings in three normative transitions. They found that transnational recruitment draws on both social networks and individual agencies for athletic success, as it is difficult for club teams recruiting athletes to spend money recruiting at the international level. This is why transnational networks are valuable from a coach and club manager's standpoint, it has the potential to progress the club or not. The ability to adapt to cultural and psychological norms plays a role in an athlete's transition as these athletes expressed issues with the style of play, weather, language, culture, and staying in contact with family and friends from their home country. The last concern of career termination at the transnational level is connected to the transnational network and sense of belonging. The concern for transnational mobility rises as career termination becomes a reality for these athletes as the added benefits of being a professional athlete begin to be reduced such as visa permits, club and administration support (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014).

### **Career Termination**

Career termination is an inevitable process that every athlete will experience at some point in their careers, which has been a major focus of career transition research in the past. The difference in the quality of transition out of sport is dependent on the individual. If an athlete prepares an exit strategy or takes a proactive approach to retirement (i.e., planned retirement) the likelihood of experiencing a more positive experience is greater (Lally, 2007), opposed to when

an athlete is forced into retirement (i.e., unplanned retirement) due to a possible injury or deselection (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004) they experience less positive effects. Research involving involuntary career termination tends to be associated with more negative effects such as loss of identity (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Lynch, 2006), sense of betrayal and social exclusion (McKenna & Thomas, 2007), substance abuse and psychological distress (Gouttebauge, Aoki, & Kerkhoffs, 2016).

**Involuntary Retirement.** Athletic retirement is a multifaceted and complex event for individuals to experience that sometimes needs the assistance of mental performance consultants (MPC). Lack of control coupled with a high level of athletic identity can lead to negative effects for an individual such as negative emotions, feelings of loss, and isolation. For example, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) explored elite retired female gymnasts' experience of retirement through retrospective interviews. Throughout the sample of seven retired gymnasts, identity loss was salient amongst six athletes, as they devoted the majority of their adolescence to gymnastics. This created an exclusive athletic identity for these individuals, which resulted in a difficult transition to life after sport. Professional athletes experience similar effects of retirement as the gymnasts, such as Wippert and Wippert (2010) examined retirement in professional national team-athletes and the development of mental health issues. Data was collected through standardized questionnaires 10 days before entrance (baseline-test), 10 days after, 3 weeks after, and 5.5 months after career termination. From the forty-two professional athletes, they found that athletes who were involuntarily dismissed reported higher levels of psychopathological symptom distress compared to those that terminated their careers on their own. A portion of the sample also experiences distress 5.5 months after career termination (Wippert & Wippert, 2010). These negative outcomes from career termination are common in North America as well. For example,

Lotysz and Short (2004) studied the effects of career termination from the National Football League (NFL) through an in-depth interview. The former NFL athletes interviewed was asked to respond to questions about how he felt at that given point (approximately 4 years after career termination). Throughout the interview, the athlete expressed his difficulties regarding injury, mental health issues (i.e., suicidal thoughts), and financial difficulties resulting in involuntary retirement. This study helps highlight how impactful a forced retirement can be for an individual.

**Voluntary Retirement.** An athlete's free choice to retire is associated with less negative effects on an individual's adjustment to life after sport. Successful career termination transition for athletes is usually accompanied by dual careers/identity balance (Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015), accomplishing sporting goals (Erpič, Wylleman, Zupančič, 2004; Martin, Fogarty, Albion, 2014), retirement planning, and social support (Stambulova, Stephan & Jäphag, 2007). Retirement for athletes can occur at a variety of ages, for example, Cummins and O'Boyle (2015) studied the psychosocial factors involved in transitioning from college to post-college careers for Male NCAA Division-I basketball players. They found that the athletes that experienced a successful transition to post-college life had positive social support, openness to alternatives (i.e., identity exploration, career alternatives, and or learned resourcefulness), and pre-transition planning. These findings support Torregrosa et al.'s (2015) and Stambulova et al.'s (2007) successful career termination findings, which highlights why an athlete at a young age may consider exploring many pathways towards sports development to reduce negative developmental implications later on in life.

### **Summary**

Athlete's ability to cope with transitions and adversity is influential on the outcome of their careers. Transitions athletes face are not mutually exclusive to other factors in their

lifespan. For example, as an athlete transitions from a junior-to-senior level of competition, they may also experience a change in the athletic environment (i.e., migration), which poses more factors to acknowledge in the adaptation process. Fiske's (2004) five pathways to adaptation assist in understanding how an athlete may successfully adapt to the transition they are experiencing. Stambulova et al.'s (2017) highlights career trajectories for their elite-level hockey players transitioning into the senior level of competition, in which North American hockey players may follow similar pathways in athlete development. For example, major junior hockey transition to the National Hockey League (NHL) or if an athlete transitions from the *'farm'* or *'affiliate'* team, which is the American Hockey League (AHL) or the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL) upwards in performance (e.g., AHL to NHL). This process has many references in the hockey world such as *'being called up'* and the opposite may happen for athletes as well as those demoted within the organization and referred to as *'being sent down'* but it ultimately means a player is being *'loaned'* either upwards or downwards in leagues. The purpose of these affiliate teams or farm teams is to develop an athlete, mentally and physically, to handle the demands of playing in the league above their current level. As most of the literature exclusively focuses on transitions such as junior-to-senior transition, deselection, or career termination, there is no research exploring the specific process of an athlete loaned and reclaimed by an organization. Findings from junior-to-senior transition studies (Bruner et al., 2008) and deselection studies (Blakelock et al., 2016; Moussavi et al., 2007) can be applicable to the loaning process, as this can be unpredictable and uncontrollable for most athletes, which makes it apparent that psychological characteristics play an influential role for an athlete (McNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b).

## Chapter Two: Rationale & Purpose

### Rationale

Early sport career transition literature consisted of career termination (Alfermann et al., 2004), which then expanded to within-career transitions involving entry into elite sport (Bruner et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2017), selection and deselection (Blakelock et al., 2016), and transitions such as trades (Nicholson et al., 1998) and or migration (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). The expansion of literature assists athletes, coaches, and sport practitioners in the qualities and traits that successful athletes pose in a given transition. When these transitions occur, an athlete's ability to adapt becomes influential and a determining factor in the relative success of the transition. As researchers have studied a variety of transitions within elite sport around the world, one transition that occurs in professional sports that lacks literature is the loaning process, which can be either a promotion or demotion in leagues yet within the same organization. This is common in the world of professional hockey, for example, an athlete may start the season with the NHL team and throughout the year the team may loan the athlete to the AHL team for developmental reasoning, which can occur many times throughout the season. The loaning process can be perceived as a normative or non-normative depending on if the athlete is anticipating a transition or not. For example, if the athlete is experiencing a reduction in playing time they might anticipate being sent down, which would result in a normative transition. If an athlete does not notice a reduction in playing time and they are sent down unexpectedly or unanticipated this would be considered a non-normative transition (Schlossberg, 1984; Sharf, 1997). This specific normative and non-normative transition, given the context, is specific to professional sports such as the NHL, National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS). There are some minor differences between

NHL and MLB when it comes to affiliate teams since not every athlete that is on the NHL's farm team is technically under contract for the NHL team, whereas in the MLB each rostered player on the affiliate team is able to experience an upward loan to the MLB team. For example, the Toronto Maple Leafs have an AHL affiliate team called the Toronto Marlies, in which, if the NHL team (Maple Leafs) is in need of a player, they are able to select an AHL player if they are under contract with the NHL team. There are cases where an AHL rostered player is under contract with a different NHL team, this is not uncommon to see, it is usually an agreement between two organizations.

Stambulova et al.'s (2017) and Battocchio et al.'s (2010) share findings that assist in this process (i.e., adaptation strategies and sub-strategies) but there are no specific studies that explore the loaning process by a hockey organization in North America. The findings from this study can inform organizations, policymakers and coaches on key attributes, which foster long term athlete development. Findings can assist athletes, sport scientists, and MPCs on key characteristics that benefit athlete's ability to be resilient throughout this process. Battocchio and Stambulova (2019) studied coping resources and strategies utilized by Canadian NHL players during each career stage within the empirical NHL career model. Rookies, veterans, and retirees participated in interviews regarding these resources. The career stages that are of interest in this study are the athletes that are *'entering the NHL'* and *'developing as an NHL player'* as these athletes have yet to reach a full-time position as an *'NHL elite'*. They found that athletes in each of the two stages experience an underlying issue of the idealization of assignment to the minor league, which can be influential in their performance on and off the ice. Future research needs to understand individual experiences in defining moments in their careers (Battocchio & Stambulova, 2019) such as the loaning experience for an athlete, however no research on this

specific transition has occurred. The purpose of this study is to explore professional hockey players' lived experiences being called up and sent down in organizations, specifically how does an athlete experience being called up and sent down?

### **Delimitations/Limitations**

There are some delimitations to consider in this study. This study will use a qualitative approach to understand professional male hockey players' lived experience(s) with loaning in an organization. The size and gender of the sample make it difficult to generalize findings over other athletic populations however using a phenomenological approach allows the researchers to understand the lived experiences of each athlete.

The specific transition is only applicable in professional sports that utilize an affiliate or developmental team in professional sports such as NHL, NBA, MLB, or MLS. It is difficult to generalize the findings from this study to professional sports such as tennis due to the difference in individual to team sport as well as there are no development team. The psychological skills that athletes utilize throughout this process can assist all athletic populations that deal with adversity.

In addition to the difficulty in generalizing findings across athletic populations, it is important to be aware of the difficulty in participant response rate, as the culture of hockey tends to be close-knit (Botterill, 2004), which may result in a low response rate. Due to the lack of research in this specific transition, it will be important to understand an athlete's professional career history of this process, hence an athlete may experience recall bias discussing previous playing seasons.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This study used a constructivist philosophical assumption, while engaging in phenomenology as a methodological approach, in order to understand an athlete's lived experiences of the loaning process in an organization. The ontology (i.e., what is reality?) of this study is informed by a constructivist philosophical position, which focused on understanding the meanings people create for themselves and attribute to their experiences (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Phenomenology is described as, "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). . This approach to understanding lived experiences allowed informants to contribute to the construction of shared meaning of a lived experience (i.e., being called up/sent down). A phenomenological approach to sport psychology research has expanded knowledge in areas such as junior-to-senior transitions (Bruner et al., 2008), coping in sport (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005), and meaning of sports injury to collegiate athletes (Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010). Utilizing a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study as it allowed an athlete the opportunity to be an expert in the topic and allowed the researcher to move beyond brief descriptions toward understanding this athletic transition (Dale, 1996). Phenomenology has been used in the past with athletes' experiences during a transition (Bruner et al., 2008) and was recommended by Battochio and Stambulova (2019) in order to gain more contextual knowledge on certain aspects of careers of hockey players.

Within this type of research, it is important to acknowledge my personal connection with transitions with the sport of hockey, as this may influence my perception of the data. As I was a competitive hockey player and currently working in the hockey world, I have experience with many transitions throughout my own career such as entry into elite sport, deselection, transition

to non-elite sport, and experienced the process of being sent down and called up at a junior level. My personal experience influenced the interview questions regarding coaching staff interactions and psychological characteristics needed to handle transitions. I wanted to explore the lived experiences that professional hockey players have with the loaning process in an organization.

### **Procedure**

After ethical approval from Brock University's Research Ethics Board, prospective professional hockey players were recruited through email and in person to participate in the study by using key informants from the principal investigator's hockey network. Through initial contact with the participant the purpose and description of the study were explained, necessary inclusion criteria were discussed, and if inclusion criteria were met then the prospective participant was invited to join the study. Participants were purposefully sampled due to the specificity of transition, while some snowball sampling occurred (Creswell, 2013). There were no benefits towards the researcher besides the knowledge of interpersonal and mental skills that professional athletes use in order to handle adversity within their career transitions. After the participant accepted the invitation to join the study, the researcher set a potential time and date to interview the participant. Participants engaged in one in-depth interview with the researcher during the second half of the hockey season (February-March) to gain insight on firsthand experiences throughout the loaning process. Since the sample of athlete's were geographically dispersed throughout North America, most interviews occurred through Skype (5 out of 6 interviews). Skype is a telecommunication application that provides individuals with the opportunity to voice call and video call one another between computers, tablets, mobile devices and smartwatches through the Internet (Skype, 2014). Although connecting to an athlete through an online video platform may be difficult in order to gain their insight on this transition,

consistent email communication prior to the interview helped with building rapport (Seitz, 2015) and text messaging. After rapport was developed with the athletes, the researcher conducted the interview on the date set with the participant. Prior to the interview the participant was sent an informed consent form, a synopsis of the interview, and the interview guide to begin to think of their experiences of career transitions throughout their career. Once the informed consent form (see Appendix A for copy of consent form) was signed and sent back to the researcher, the interview began.

Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher conducted a pilot interview with a former professional hockey player who experienced this transition twice in his career. This allowed the researcher to tweak any questions to enhance the fluidity of questions asked and the answers anticipated. No data was collected from this process. This process did not change any questions that were asked from the interview guide, but it created a probe question to ask participants about salary changes from league to league.

### **Data Collection**

**Participants.** A purposeful sample including six male professional hockey players ranged from the age of 26 to 45 years of age where each participant experienced or are experiencing being called up and or sent down within their given sport organization. The athletes in this sample are current players, where 5 of the athletes are current professional players and one is a former professional and current competitive player. These athletes have played professional hockey for a minimum of 3 years to a maximum of 24 years. The athletes have played mainly within North America, but one athlete played in Europe (e.g., England, Italy, Finland, Switzerland) and Russia. Participants in this study play or have played professional hockey within North American leagues such as the NHL, American Hockey League (AHL), East

Coast Hockey League (ECHL), Southern Professional Hockey League (SPHL), and Federal Hockey League (FHL). The NHL is the highest level of hockey an athlete is able to play in the world, which have affiliate teams in a lower skill level league such as the AHL, athletes that are unable to play at this level can be placed in the lower league such as the ECHL. The purpose of these affiliate teams in the lower end leagues is to develop a player in order to compete at the NHL level. Players are constantly sent down to lower leagues for many reasons consisting of development of skill level, conditioning stints from lack of playing time or injury rehabilitation, as well as being re-assigned to their once former team (i.e., sent down). This process can play an influential role in an athlete's ability to compete as they are constantly going into new team environments, new team roles, increased skill level, and coaching styles. Participants were purposefully sampled due to the specificity of transition, there was some snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect confidentiality.

Table 1. *Demographic information*

<b>Athlete</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Level of Competition</b>	<b>Approx. Number of Call up/Sent Down</b>
Athlete #1	45	Player	M	Competitive	15-20 times
Athlete #2	28	Player	M	Professional	5-10 times
Athlete #3	27	Goalie	M	Professional	10 times
Athlete #4	27	Goalie	M	Professional	10-15 times
Athlete #5	28	Player	M	Professional	10-15 times
Athlete #6	26	Player	M	Professional	15-20 times

**Interview.** Individual interviews were the main method to collect information regarding athletes' experiences with the process of being called up and sent down by an organization.

Participants participated in one semi-structured interview that ranged from 39 minutes to 67 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview question styles were guided by Patton's (2002) *Six Categories of Questions*, as it allowed the structure of questions to follow the experience/behaviour, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background questions. The interview format consisted of introductory questions such as their sporting background, transitions they previously experienced in their sporting career, the process of being called up and sent down, narrative/critical incident questions, and closing questions regarding any comments they want to make on this process or anything else they want to add to. Sample key questions included, "Please tell me about your experience(s) being called up?" "Please tell me about being sent down?" and "Please tell me about how you were feeling after you received the news you will be loaned to a lower team?" (see Appendix B for interview guide). The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to probe for more detailed answers and clarification on specific examples related to their experiences. Five interviews were conducted through Skype due to the participants being geographically dispersed throughout North America for the most part, one interview was conducted in person. Throughout the interview each participant was reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and were able to withdrawal from the study without any consequences.

**Data Management.** The audio-recordings from each interview was transcribed verbatim using office software (Microsoft Office Word) on a private password encrypted computer. The typed transcriptions were stored on a private computer and backed up on a portable hard drive to ensure that all information is kept confidential. The demographic information collected from each participant was coded for the researcher to establish one transcription from the other but any identifying quotes from participants regarding personal identifiers was kept confidential. The

participants were given pseudonyms to assist the researcher in deciphering participant from participant but also to ensure that confidentiality was kept.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were transcribed verbatim before they could have been analyzed, the athlete reviewed the transcribed interview and consented to the transcripts to be used in data analysis. The data analysis followed a two-phase process analysis of the transcribed data (Van Manen, 1990). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and each interview was read through individually three times. The first phase of analysis involved within data-analysis where the interviews were read for a sense of wholeness, salience, and patterns. The first interview read through was to gain a sense of wholeness of the athlete being interviewed. The second read through was to gain a sense of salience related to the research question as well as other salient contributions to the research. The third read through was to develop a sense of patterns that emerged through coding for descriptive codes (label and summarized in short words or expression), process codes (observable and conceptual actions), verbatim quotes, and idioms (word(s) of expression). Following this process, each interview was summarized and the patterns throughout each interview were then placed into a table to more easily see commonalities across the interviews as we moved into the second phase of data analysis. The second phase of data analysis consisted of comparing patterns across interviews, seeing what was common across the interviews.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative data it is necessary to establish trustworthiness of research findings. Trustworthiness is based upon credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to the internal validity of the researcher, in which

credibility establishes that the study conducted is measuring what is intended. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that ensuring credibility is a very important aspect to establish credibility within a study. This was accomplished through tasks such as member checks, researcher experience, thick description of phenomenon, and examination of previous research findings. The member checks were achieved through constant interaction between a member of the research team and lead researcher, where codes and patterns were discussed in a constant manner to establish common patterns and codes. The researcher's experiences were established early on in the study and stated previous personal experience with this athletic transition and athletic population. The description of phenomenon was accomplished through the results in the second phase of analysis and the examination of previous research findings was established in the literature review. The transferability of these findings refers to the ability to utilize these findings to other sport domains. The findings are transferable to a certain extent, meaning if sporting structures support this type of transition then these findings can be extrapolated to that sport (i.e., findings in hockey can be transferred to baseball due to similar structure of being called up and sent down). The steps taken throughout this study to establish transferability was to gain rich descriptive data throughout. The more description and communication of findings the more likely these findings can be applied to other athletic populations, transitions, and other performance situations.

Dependability refers to strength of the study design, if the design of the study is strong, then the findings will be consistent and repeatable. The aim was to verify that the findings were consistent with the raw data collected. This was accomplished through member checks with a research team member on the codes and patterns established in the interviews. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results found in this study are supported by the data that is collected and analyzed, which was accomplished through verbatim quotes from the participants

to describe their experiences. In this study the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are accomplished to enhance the trustworthiness of findings.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Levels of Data Analysis**

The following chapter is organized through a two-phase process analysis of the data collected (Van Manen, 1990). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and each interview was individually read three times. The first phase of analysis involved within data-analysis where the interviews were read for a sense of wholeness, salience, and patterns. The first interview read through was to gain a sense of wholeness of the athlete being interviewed. The second read through was to gain a sense of salience related to the research question as well as other salient contributions to the research. The third read through was to develop a sense of patterns that may be emerging through coding for descriptive codes (label and summarize in short word or expression), process codes (observable and conceptual actions), verbatim quotes, and idioms (word(s) of expression). At this time the codes established in the interviews were discussed with a research team member to challenge the dependability of patterns. Following this process, each interview was summarized and the patterns throughout each interview were then placed into a table to more easily see commonalities across the interviews as we moved into the second phase of data analysis. The second phase of data analysis consisted of comparing patterns across interviews, seeing what is common across the interviews (Patton, 2015). After this was completed, discussion with a research team member was conducted again to challenge the dependability of patterns across interviews. The patterns were then placed into a chart to easily see what patterns were in each interview and compare them to similar patterns in other interviews, thereby distinguishing the cross-interview patterns. This allowed the researcher to cluster patterns together that were related and then assign them to an overall theme of that cluster of patterns.

**Phase 1 – Within Data-Analysis; Reading for Wholeness, Salience, and Patterns**

After the interviews were completed and transcribed verbatim, each interview was read over three times. The first time was to gain a sense of wholeness of the interview and the content, the second time was to gain a sense of salience throughout, and the third time was to understand the patterns that were emerging through coding. The following section presents summaries of each athlete, salience, and patterns in each interview completed.

**Athlete #1.** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #1; a 45-year-old athlete who has 24 years of professional hockey experience all over the world and is currently a competitive hockey player. This athlete has experienced the loaning experience from the NHL to the AHL approximately 15-20 times.

**Salience.** Throughout the interview the athlete understands the business of professional hockey and that sometimes being sent down is a numbers game, as player-contracts play a major role. When talking about his experience being called up, he expressed the positive emotions and relates it back to, *‘living his dream’*. When he is sent down, after having time to reflect, he realized it is not all negative emotions going down since he accomplished his goal and he is able to go back to the goal scorer role instead of a *‘grinder’* role. This athlete used hockey as an outlet to his happiness when things outside of the hockey context were influencing him. Transparency was referenced a few times, as sometimes the coaches do not communicate accurately about what is going on, which has the potential to derail performance. He makes an interesting comment towards the team dynamic of playing professional hockey as if you are dealing with issues outside of hockey there is a lack of support within the room since some athlete’s want you to fail in order for them to take your spot (i.e., internal competition). The concept of, *‘being on*

*an island*' is brought up frequently throughout the interview while discussing the process of being called up, sent down, or just in general in professional hockey.

**Pattern.** Throughout the interview this athlete expressed a breadth of understanding the business of professional hockey, as sometimes in professional hockey contracts play a deciding factor in your ability to stay on a team. During the process of being called up and sent down, this athlete expressed an array of obstacles to overcome such as being able to *'flip your brain'* to focus on the next game, role changes (e.g., goal scorer to a 'grinder'), and consistent reference being independent throughout this process. Coaching staff and management throughout this process tended to lack transparency with the athletes, which in his opinion does not benefit the athlete or the organization.

**Athlete #2.** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #2; a 28-year old professional hockey player that has been playing professional hockey for 3 years now after completing 4 years in university and 4 years in Major Junior hockey. This athlete has experienced transitions at the junior level and now is experiencing the process of being called up and sent down.

**Salience.** This athlete's experience of being called up throughout his career has been positive as this athlete actively participates in mindfulness and taking each day one step at a time. This active participation in mindfulness has allowed him to see his emotions for what they are and not bury them. As this athlete is sent down, there is some sadness, but he perceives this transition as an opportunity to go into a great situation with his former team (i.e., purpose and leader on former team). Throughout his interview there are patterns of mindfulness, *'feeding your brain'*, and mental skills. The concept of uncertainty is salient within the interview as the athlete does not know how long he will be called up or sent down for, he understands that if he

gives this a lot of attention it can be a negative influence on his well-being and performance. The business of professional hockey is apparent as the athlete makes reference to it early in the interview, as it can be a, '*numbers game*' as he states. One transition that was brought up was the transition of moving back home to his parents' house during the hockey season, this was an adjustment for him since he has not been home during the hockey season since minor hockey.

***Pattern.*** Throughout the interview this athlete expressed the ability to practice mindfulness with his everyday life that influences his experience with the uncertainty brought on professional hockey. During the process of being called up and sent down, this athlete does not know what kind of role he is supposed to fill on the new team, how long he will be staying, or if he will play. In the process of being called up, this athlete expressed positive experiences when it comes to coach-athlete interactions with both, his former team and new team. Although this athlete is playing at a higher level and it seems as if there are no negative encounters, this athlete explains some discomfort in living in a hotel room as it can disrupt his ability to cook food. Throughout this process this athlete utilizes his social support such as family and close friends to assist him through this process.

***Athlete #3.*** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #3; is a 27-year old professional hockey player who has been playing professional for 3 years, played junior hockey, prep school, and university hockey. This athlete has experienced and is experiencing transitions such as deselection, being called up, and being sent down.

***Salience.*** This athlete has experienced a whirlwind of transitions throughout his professional career thus far. When asked about being called up, this athlete expressed excitement and fulfillment when playing at the higher level as he believes he should be playing at that level. When asked about being sent down, the athlete expressed negative comments towards coaching

staff and discusses how teammate interactions can be sometimes negative. After experiencing multiple transitions throughout his professional career, he has developed crucial skills to self-evaluate in order to better himself on and off the ice. The lack of transparency from coaches tends to promote a negative transition for this athlete as he believes it places athletes on the wrong path to development. An interesting part of the interview was when he discusses how some professional athletes need to quit hockey because they cannot afford to play, as the salaries some players earn are too low to cover life expenses.

***Pattern.*** The difference in pressures and stressors that a position (i.e., goalie) can pose for an athlete are clear throughout this interview as the athlete expressed his struggles with the business of professional hockey. This athlete experienced the culture and gain an understanding of the business of professional hockey. During his experiences of being called up and sent down, this athlete demonstrated how important the environment, coach-athlete relationships, and transparency from coaching staff is for an athlete. The uncertainty of professional hockey can be detrimental for athletes and throughout his career this athlete leans on his social support system. An interesting finding throughout this interview is the conceptualization that some professional hockey players are not able to afford to play professional hockey, which can be paradoxical. This can be perceived as paradoxical because an outsider would make the assumption that a professional athlete is able to cover their own cost of living, but in professional hockey this can be a barrier to play professional.

***Athlete #4.*** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #4; is a 27-year old professional hockey player who has been playing professional hockey for 8 years, 4 years of major junior. This athlete has experienced many transitions from his Junior career to his present season with his current team. Working his way

up the ranks from Major Junior to playing in the NHL, he has experienced being traded, sent down, and called up.

***Salience.*** From a position standpoint, being a goalie produces different obstacles compared to a player as there are fewer positions for goalies to fill on a team. During the interview, when asked about being sent down and called up, he makes it clear that he understands the business of hockey and sometimes it can be a numbers game as he has experienced this firsthand. A factor that is brought up while being called up to a team is the ability to adjust to living in a hotel room. While being called up or sent down, this athlete expressed his use of social support as he has close family and friends that assist him through these transitions. When called up, this athlete expressed that the team, including coaching staff and players, welcomes him with open arms which makes it easier to focus on his job. Although being sent down can be perceived as a negative transition, this athlete sheds light on the positive side of getting back to his apartment where he feels more comfortable being able to cook and be able to play the amount of time he is used to on the ice. This athlete offers some advice towards coaches and management to *'be honest'* and *'lay it out there'* as there is a lot of *'hemming and hawing'* in professional hockey, which can place some unnecessary pressure on some athletes.

***Pattern.*** The type of transition an athlete experiences fosters different emotions such as the type of call up (i.e., playing or not playing) a goalie experiences brings upon a variety of emotions for the athlete. Throughout this athlete's career he has experienced firsthand the business of professional hockey, as the experience of being called up or sent down becomes less of a novel experience, this allows the athlete to embrace the present moment for what it is and as he is sent down it is viewed as an opportunity to step back into his prior role and develop as a goalie. While this athlete does communicate positive experiences with professional hockey and

the process of being called up and sent down, there is some discomfort that comes along with it such as living in a hotel room and the lack of transparency in the world of professional hockey. An interesting find here is this athlete recognizes and understands that using his platform of being a professional hockey player can truly make a difference in a fan's life by simply just taking the time to take a picture or sign an autograph.

**Athlete #5.** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #5; a 28-year old with a 9-year professional career, 4 years major junior, playing since he was 6 years old, and has experienced being called up and sent down approximately 10-15 times throughout his career, while playing with three different organizations.

***Salience.*** This athlete has had a relatively positive experience throughout his hockey career. He provided insight that there are inconveniences that professional hockey player's experience that an outsider would not know about, referring to player's not being able to see families for the year or during the time they are called up, as well as not spending holidays with loved ones. He understands the business side of professional hockey as he has experienced it first-hand. The process of being sent down impacts him as his '*window for NHL games is slowly closing*', but on the flipside of it he is able to be a mentor for the younger players in the minors and is able to play in a more performance role with the AHL team. When asked about being called up this athlete provided insight that his hockey role changes from being a 1<sup>st</sup> line goal scorer that plays on special teams to be a 4<sup>th</sup> line energy athlete coupled with living in a hotel room and not being able to cook his own meals. He is a strong believer when an athlete is comfortable in daily occurrences it tends to show in their performance. Throughout this process, this athlete leans on his social support system for emotional and tangible support.

**Pattern.** The ability to adjust to the environment of professional hockey and how contracts play a major role in an athlete's roster spot has allowed this athlete to have such a successful career thus far. This athlete did not experience many transitions throughout his junior career or professional career except for being called up and sent down. This athlete provided insight into his experience of being called up as a highly positive emotion driven experience, while on the other hand being sent down does promote negative emotions such as disappointment but it is not all bad as he is able to go back to his prior role (e.g., go-to guy). As he is called up, he does convey that it can be difficult to adjust to living in a hotel room and not being able to cook, as he believes the more comfortable, he is in an environment, the better he will perform.

**Athlete #6.** This section summarizes the interview, salience, and patterns pertaining to Athlete #6; a 26-year old player who is in his 7th year of professional hockey and played 4 years of junior hockey. He has experienced transitions such as being called up and sent down in professional hockey many times.

**Salience.** Through his career he has developed '*thick skin*' to handle the adversities within the culture of hockey, which range from coaching styles and teammate interactions to the relocation of living in uncomfortable apartment supplied by the teams. In order to deal with this process, this athlete is a strong believer in routines to give himself the confidence in order to produce on the ice, sticking to his identity as a hockey player, as well as being able to lean on his close support systems to handle the roller coaster ride of professional hockey. He makes comment towards negative influences a coach-athlete relationship coupled with toxic dressing room dynamics can have on an athlete's well-being and performance. As this athlete's experience with being called up and sent down becomes a norm, the more the athlete becomes

accustomed and numb to the inflated emotions that come with this process. This athlete makes an interesting comparison to being called up as you are, *‘on top of the mountain with a full stomach where you’ve been climbing for so long and it feels like you belong there’* and then as you are sent down, *‘you’re on the opposite side of the mountain’*. Patterns of embracing it all and believing in yourself and who you are as an athlete is frequently brought up about this.

**Pattern.** Throughout this athlete’s career thus far it is clear that this athlete utilizes his resources during each transition he experiences. This athlete understood the business of professional hockey early on in his career, as he began to experience being called up and sent down. As this novel experience lessened, the athlete became aware of utilizing his strengths in order to perform optimally such as a social support system, self-belief, and the practice of mindfulness. As this athlete experiences transitions throughout his career, it is clear what factors assist this athlete in performing optimally such as reciprocal coach-athlete relationship, mindfulness, and self-belief.

**Phase 2 – Across Data Analysis; Cross Interview By-Pattern**

To read for patterns across interviews, patterns from each interview were put into a chart to visually see where the commonalities across interviews are. Below you will see patterns from each interview. The following section displays the themes and patterns found within each athlete interview in Table 1, which then is clustered into similar groups and themes to better understand the data collected.

Table 2. *Athlete interview patterns*

Athlete #1	Athlete #2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business of professional hockey, numbers game with contracts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the business of professional hockey as it is a numbers game with contracts, and it is obvious that it is a <i>‘job here’</i></li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency with coaching staff, lack of transparency, when sent down they tend to not tell you the full truth</li> <li>• When sent down, experience of positive emotions, when sent down it's not all negative emotions, makes reference to being 'on an island'</li> <li>• When sent down, experience of happiness as his role changes from a 'grinder' to a play maker</li> <li>• Making the transition to professional hockey, experiencing life transitions as well (living on your own, cooking, cleaning, distractions)</li> <li>• Used teammates as social support during transitions</li> <li>• When being called up, he does not want to get in the way of anyone or 'step on anyone's toes'</li> <li>• When being sent down, reference to being on your own and playing the compare game mentally towards others that are being called up or still playing in the NHL</li> <li>• Culture of hockey and substance abuse in order to numb their anxiety</li> <li>• Lack of parental involvement</li> <li>• Theme of anxiety and mental distress are apparent, being called up and sent down</li> <li>• Being able to 'flip your brain' quick, meaning to focus on what's important at that given time and not on being sent down but what game is coming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patterns of mindfulness/meditation in every step he takes, whether it being called up or being sent down, he takes it for what it is in a non-judgemental way. This mindset has overlap into his everyday life. When sent down, aware of emotions but does not suppress them</li> <li>• Makes connection to transitions experienced at the junior level to university level, then to professional level</li> <li>• Theme of uncertainty comes up a lot when talking about being called up or sent down as no one knows how long it will be, also what kind of role you're filling</li> <li>• Experienced two trades in the junior level</li> <li>• Social support is mainly family and close friends</li> <li>• Very welcoming environment when called up with coaches, players, staff, and even wives/girlfriends</li> <li>• When called up the ability to cook is eliminated as this athlete lives in an hotel, creates some frustration</li> <li>• Feelings of gratefulness when things happen, and adversity makes this athlete mentally stronger</li> </ul>
<p>Athlete #3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience more stress/pressure as his mistakes show on the scoreboard and he shares the same record as the team, where a player does not</li> <li>• Experienced the politics of hockey at a young age where he had to switch teams in minor hockey, then at a junior hockey camp he played great, yet they brought in their own goalie and was cut</li> <li>• Experienced injuries at the college level that lingered for years to come overlapping into his pro career</li> </ul>	<p>Athlete #4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced many transitions throughout junior and pro career, also experiencing some not ideal transitions with lack of resources for equipment</li> <li>• An emergency call up promotes a different mindset of being called up</li> <li>• Experiences a lot of social support while being called up</li> <li>• Good experiences being called up, very welcoming, while being called up you do not 'want to step on anyone's toes'</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes comment about a toxic environment from College hockey team that put him in a bad place mentally, transitioning from starter to back-up after injury</li> <li>• Experienced many transitions (6 times being cut and 9 or 10 different transactions)</li> <li>• Makes more comments about the environment of pro hockey and being called up he enjoyed the environment of wanting to win</li> <li>• Business of pro hockey is understood here (cutthroat), however team chemistry is not a priority</li> <li>• Social support being called up and sent down, family friends and girlfriend, emotional support and financial in some parts</li> <li>• Transparency with coaching communication on what this athlete needs to do lacks, sense of frustration is apparent, makes comment about 'seeing through the fog' referring to seeing through the lie's coaches may tell you</li> <li>• Some friction between teammates as they come back to former team</li> <li>• The concept of not being able to afford to play pro hockey is bewildering, as some players are not paid enough to live</li> <li>• Lack of job security creates anxiety</li> <li>• Comparison game to other players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business of pro hockey is salient throughout the interview as contracts play an influential role in being able to play in the NHL</li> <li>• Just wants to fit in when called up, not step on anyone's toes</li> <li>• Different sides to being called up dependent on the role being filled</li> <li>• Living in a hotel when called up and not being able to cook</li> <li>• References social media can be a detriment to well-being and performance</li> <li>• When sent down, back to being go-to goalie</li> <li>• Enjoy the present moment when being called up</li> <li>• Make a fans day with interaction that regular people could not, however some adult fans just want to make a buck off you</li> <li>• Transparency with coaches</li> </ul>
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<p>Athlete #5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjustment going from minor hockey to junior as he is playing against more mature athletes</li> <li>• Never experienced trades or loans prior to being called up and sent down</li> <li>• As he gets called up his role changes from a 'go-to' guy to a more grinder and lower line player</li> <li>• Social support being called up and sent down are girlfriend, parents, player agent</li> <li>• Being called up, makes reference to living in a hotel not being able to cook, that is an adjustment. As he makes reference to good performance comes from being comfortable and living in a hotel room makes that difficult</li> <li>• Understands the business of pro hockey making reference to being called up and sent down</li> <li>• Being sent down brings upon negative emotions such as disappointment, constantly thinking about what the coach says (stagnate on what happened)</li> <li>• Internal competition when a player gets called up and sent down</li> <li>• Being sent down placed him in a 'dark spot' as he ended up being injured and was unable to play</li> <li>• Process has made him more aware and able to handle emotions</li> <li>• Makes reference to walking on eggshells when called up</li> </ul>	<p>Athlete #6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence began as accomplishments were achieved; this athlete had a different perspective on how his passion developed</li> <li>• Adversities early on pro career helped developed thick skin to handle the culture of hockey (old school type players)</li> <li>• Makes reference to mindfulness while being called up</li> <li>• Makes reference to mental distress throughout career, being called up or sent down or being injured</li> <li>• Gaining athletic identity is salient throughout entire interview</li> <li>• Creating a support system for these transitions</li> <li>• Environmental factors influence well-being and performance</li> <li>• Compare and contrast game occurs when other guys are called up instead of him</li> <li>• Coach-athlete relationship is influential in well-being and performance, makes reference to an autocratic type of leadership with one of the coaches</li> </ul>
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The purpose of inputting the patterns into a chart made it easier to see what patterns were in each interview and compare them to similar patterns in the other interviews, thereby discerning the cross-interview patterns (Patton, 2015). After the comparison of patterns across the interviews was completed, it allowed the researcher to cluster patterns together that were related and then to assign an overall theme to that cluster of patterns. The overall themes are:

1. Mindfulness
2. Mental Distress
3. Social Support
4. Effect of environment
5. The business of hockey
6. Coach-athlete relationship
7. Happiness at returning to a familiar/preferred role
8. Use of metaphors
9. Romanticizing of hockey and fan disconnect from the reality of the pressures

### **Cluster 1 – Performance & Well-Being of an Athlete**

The themes of mindfulness, mental distress, social support and coach-athlete relationship can be clustered together since there is a lot of overlap, which they interact with each other as well. This also has a ripple effect as if one of these categories is lacking or not sufficient, it has an influence on an athlete's performance as well as their well-being. This cluster helps better understand the interpersonal factors that influence an athlete.

The ability for each athlete to embrace each moment when they are called up or sent down is crucial for their development, also referred to as the theme of mindfulness. **Mindfulness** is a trainable skill that can be described as paying attention in a certain way on purpose that is non-judgmental and non-reactively (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The patterns of mindfulness are discussed as a few athlete's make connection to the ability to be mindful within their career, as if they were not able to be present and learn each day this could potentially have a negative influence on their development in their career and self-discovery. Being mindful or practicing mindfulness in professional hockey is essential if an athlete wishes to develop necessary skills to

perform at the elite level. Mindfulness can be a pivotal skill that has lasting potential for professional hockey players. Athlete's that are not able to participate in a mindfulness practice may find difficulty in handling situations with a progressive perspective.

The world of professional hockey promotes a lot of uncertainty for athletes, whether that being an athlete's job security or the role they may be fulfilling while they are called up, this uncertainty can be debilitating for some causing mental distress outcomes. The theme of **mental distress** varies from athlete to athlete, but the overall uncertainty promotes mental distress for athletes. This theme of mental distress can produce unproductive styles of coping such as substance abuse. While each athlete may cope with uncertainty differently, all athletes in this sample considered social support to be an asset in all facets of their development.

**Social support** was a common pattern for each athlete in order to better enhance their transitions or events within their professional career. Athlete's utilize different types of social support for different transitions but the two that were apparent were emotional and financial support, which creates the theme social support. Athletes will use family and close friends for their social support, but some utilize their current coaches.

**The coach-athlete relationship** was brought up within each interview as each athlete experiences this relationship differently. This common pattern for athletes was crucial in the athlete's potential to play professional hockey as coaches hold power over an athlete when it comes to playing time. There was a need for transparency between the coaching staff and the players during transitions. If an athlete is sent down, it is not always obvious why they were sent down, and not having transparent communication with the players does not benefit them or the coach-athlete relationship. In professional hockey, sometimes coaches hinder or enhance an athlete's career but there are times where external forces can determine that.

**Cluster 2 – External influences on professional career**

This cluster includes themes of business/ politics of professional hockey, environmental factors, and role change dependent on team. These themes can be clustered together as they can be viewed almost as a top-down hierarchy, as the business of professional hockey can influence the environment an athlete is in, which can later influence the role the athlete has on a team (i.e., if they are sent down or called up).

**The business of professional hockey** was referred to in each interview with an athlete. Athletes made it clear that in professional hockey sometimes you can have optimal performance however your ability to stay on a roster can be determined by contracts that are outside of your control. As athlete's are dealing with the business of professional hockey, they can be placed in environments they are not familiar with and not accustomed to, which can be beneficial or detrimental to their development.

The pattern of being placed in a hotel room while called up or being in a locker room where athletes are hesitant to be themselves helped guide the environmental factors theme. The **environment** an athlete is placed in can have detrimental effects to performance or it has the ability to enhance performance. Specifically, the implications of being placed in an environment such as a hotel room without the ability to cook. As an athlete is called up or sent down, the role they are fulfilling on a team can differ.

When discussing an athlete's experience being called up or sent down, most athletes expressed a sense of **happiness if they were going back to their old role** on a team compared to the role, they were temporarily fulfilling that they were unfamiliar with. When an athlete goes from a '*grinder*' to a '*goal scorer*' that has the ability to alleviate some of the uncomfortable feelings of being sent down. As each athlete describes their experience of being called up or sent

down, the pattern of using metaphors to conceptualize their experience was common amongst all interviews.

### **Cluster 3 – Interpretation of experiences**

This cluster includes metaphors of experience and romanticizing of professional hockey. These themes are coupled together because they involve the interpretation of the athlete's experience and is often times not available to the public.

**Athlete's utilize metaphors** throughout each of the interviews to display their contextual knowledge of their experience but also to demonstrate to the researcher how they perceive their experience. The types of metaphors that are used are dependent on the athlete's experience, which will be discussed further in chapter five. The athlete's ability to conceptualize their experience is an interpersonal skill they have developed. Another way an athlete expressed their experience is through the in-depth detail athletes expressed throughout their interview.

Every athlete expressed that there seems to be a **disconnect of what an outsider's perspective is on professional hockey and what really occurs**. Many times, athlete's express concern that the luxurious lifestyle that an outsider may think they are living are often times not the case, such as athletes will live in hotels for extended periods of time and not being able to cook for themselves, which forced them to eat at restaurants constantly. This constant pattern created the theme of the **romanticizing of professional hockey**.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of professional hockey players being called up and sent down in organizations. Sport career transition literature has consisted of career termination (Alfermann et al., 2004), within-career transitions involving entry into elite sport (Bruner et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2017), selection and deselection (Blakelock et al., 2016), trades (Nicholson et al., 1998) and or migration (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). The professional hockey players in this sample would be considered to be within the mastery stage as they are considered to be athletically proficient playing or have played at the professional level (Bloom, 1985). The following section discusses the themes that relate to professional hockey players' lived experiences of being called up and sent down. The findings below were developed through a two phase of data analyses and made more explicit throughout phase two of the analysis. These themes represent the patterns from the cross-interview comparison patterns. The themes are presented within their clusters of performance and well-being of an athlete, external influences on a professional career, and interpretation of experiences.

### Cluster 1 – Performance & Well-Being of an Athlete

The themes of mindfulness, mental distress, social support and coach-athlete relationship are clustered together since there is a lot of overlap and they interact with each other as well. This cluster helps understand the interpersonal factors that influence an athlete.

***Mindfulness.*** Mindfulness, which is the ability to be in the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), is salient throughout three of the interviews. One athlete expressed how the ability to be mindful in each situation allowed him to gain knowledge and experiences to assist in his performance, which positively impacted his career (i.e., being called up and staying up more often). When discussing being called up each mindful athlete learned to take every day

one step at a time and to enjoy the present moment because they have learned throughout their careers, things can change overnight (i.e., referring to how call ups can occur). In professional hockey, job security is relatively low but the mindful athletes in this sample utilized their ability to focus on what they can control during a transition, which is their ability to show up to the arena and focus on their performance. The mindful athletes within this sample were able to utilize Goodman et al.'s (2006) four key factors that influence a transition as these athletes focused on what they can control during the transition (i.e., how they show up to the arena), whether it is a promotion or demotion. As they progress through their career, they are able to continue to develop their psychological resources (i.e., being mindful/accepting) to influence their transition. They utilize their support system through emotional support if it is needed and they view their transitions as opportunities to develop and learn, rather than adopting a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006; Goodman et al., 2006).

The concept of mindfulness is apparent with a few of the athletes as this allowed the researcher to interpret that these athletes have utilized emotion-focused coping (Nicholls & Polman, 2007) in order to handle the adversities of professional hockey, which ultimately influenced their performance and well-being, on and off the ice. This theme helped capture the overall experience of being called up and sent down as some athletes have the insight and wisdom that in professional hockey, the job security is relatively low and to handle that uncertainty, they take each event or day one step at a time. This sense of coping with the precariousness of professional hockey allowed these athletes to be present more often. The theme of mindfulness interacted with the metaphors of experience theme, as the athletes that participate in mindfulness utilized optimistic metaphors, and view transitions in professional hockey as

learning experiences compared to a pessimistic outlook. Mindful athletes understood their surroundings better and function competently in their environment (Fiske, 2004, p. 25).

***Mental Distress.*** Each athlete refers to forms of mental distress throughout their career, some are more severe than others, but they all refer to it. Forms of mental distress are apparent for athletes when they are sent down as there is uncertainty in regard to why this is happening and for how long. On the opposite end of this, sometimes being called up can create mental distress for athletes depending on what role they are filling as they are called up. One athlete explained a story of how he was called up to fill a role as a fighter and the coaching staff explained who he will fight in the next game, which the anticipation created a lot of anxiety for this athlete. When it came time for the game the athlete did not play one shift and was sent down the next day without any communication on the reasoning, which in turn caused lasting mental distress for the athlete. This athlete's ability to handle this transition can be understood through Goodman et al.'s (2006) key factors that influence transitions as this athlete had high levels of stress due to the need to fight, which he had no control over his ice time (situation); as this athlete was sent down there was no communication on why which may have impacted his commitment to the game to develop (self); and received no type of support during the transition (support). This experience may be perceived as problem-focused coping at the time they were called up (i.e., fighting the other athlete will change the threat/increasing effort), however as this athlete was sent down the coping style shifted to an emotion-focused coping style as he attempts to manage what has occurred and why (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). As this athlete needs to be able to handle the demotion of being sent down this is coupled with forms of anxiety that could have been avoided. Another athlete explained how previous experiences with coaching staff members have planted anxiety and a lack of confidence in this player's ability as this athlete

expressed difficulty watching his affiliated team play because if a player on that team becomes injured, he will be called up. This created anxiety in this athlete as he had past experiences of being called up and losing his confidence in his own ability to play at the level he does. This athlete has found significant importance in developing self-confidence to handle any transition in sport (MacNamara 2010a: 2010b).

The theme of mental distress is apparent throughout most interviews as the overall concept of being called up and sent down can be detrimental to an athlete's belief system. Mental distress varied from athlete to athlete and given the situation, but this theme helped highlight how impactful being sent down can be on an athlete and sometimes those feelings can remain within an individual if they do not deal with these emotions. Athletes can experience this while being sent down and, in some cases, they may experience this while being called up as well, regardless if they are accomplishing their dream of playing in the NHL or not.

***Social Support – Emotional Support.*** Social support is salient in every interview throughout each athlete's career. The type of social support is dependent on the situational context, where most of the time athletes received emotional support from girlfriend/fiancée, family, and close friends. In some cases, social support is more frequently (i.e., dependent on how many transitions the athlete faces and the personality of the athlete). One athlete expressed that their player agent offered social support as an athlete is sent down to their previous team. The emotional support that these athletes encountered assisted in their adaptation to their transition, as social support is a key component to transitions (Goodman et al., 2006; Fiske, 2004), which in this case, emotional support assisted athletes that experienced a transition.

This theme allowed the researcher to understand that with each transition an athlete encountered throughout their career, they consistently utilized social support through people

closest to them (e.g., family or loved ones) (Murphy, 2009). The type of social support that is needed is dependent on the situational demands for the athlete. The type of social support needed when an athlete is called up tends to have similarities and differences from when an athlete is sent down. One athlete that was sent down needed financial support and emotional support, while another athlete experienced the same transition but only needed emotional support. This theme helped capture a part of the lived experiences athletes have while being called up and sent down, and assisted the researcher gain insight that to successfully transition from one team to another, it may be beneficial to have support throughout.

***Social Support – Financial Support.*** Financial support is relevant within a few of the interview's dependent on the type of transition the athlete is facing. As one athlete began his professional hockey career, he expressed that he does not make enough money to cover his style of living due to being a 'rookie' (first-year professional hockey player, oftentimes paid the lowest). Another athlete expressed concern that they do not make enough money to play professional hockey, which can be paradoxical as one would assume that professional hockey players make enough money to pay for their expenses.

As athletes experienced being sent down, they experience many transitions other than within the athletic context, such as financial transitions (i.e., tangible support) (Murphy, 2009). When an athlete is sent down, the salary they earn changes, sometimes drastically. The paradoxical relationship of athletes not making enough money to play professional hockey allowed the researcher to understand the precariousness of professional hockey that an outsider may not understand. This has overlapped with other themes such as romanticizing of professional hockey, as professional hockey players *'should'* be living a luxurious lifestyle, which is often not always the case.

*Coach-Athlete Relationship.* The coach-athlete relationship is an interesting dynamic as there is a power dynamic between the coach and the athlete, where the coach can enhance or diminish an athlete's career. The coach-athlete relationship during the loaning process can be normative or non-normative dependent on if it is anticipated or not (Schlossberg, 1984; Sharf, 1997), which influences the amount of stress they experience. The athlete that viewed a transition as an opportunity to become athletically proficient (mastery stage; Bloom, 1985) are better equipped to excel in this transition. In some cases, coaches served as a support system for an athlete in providing them with adequate information to become a better athlete, but this was not the case for most athletes in this sample (Goodman et al., 2006).

When athletes are sent down, athletes expressed a lack of transparency with the coaching staff regarding what is going on or what an athlete needs to work on to be called back up. As the lack of transparency between the coaching staff and athlete occurs, this can create some confusion for the athlete as they do not know what the true reasoning is for being sent down. In professional hockey, the coach knows exactly why an athlete is loaned to a different team and it is their choice to not be transparent, which does not assist anyone in development. This relationship can also work in favour of both parties (i.e., for an athlete and a coach), such as, if the quality of the relationship between the coach and athlete is good, coaching benefits as this relationship contains active ingredients (e.g., respect, trust, commitment, collaboration) (Jowett, 2017). This lack of transparency athletes referred to hinders the relationship they have with the coach as it lacks the active ingredients. On the opposite end, one athlete expressed that when he was sent down, he was asked for his opinion on how the coaching staff can work with the athlete to create a growth climate within the room to ease the transition of being sent down. This athlete experienced support from his coaching staff to help with his transition through his ability to trust

his coaches (Fiske, 2004) and utilize his network support (Murphy, 2009). The lower professional hockey leagues are developmental leagues for players and coaches, so if a coach can properly utilize their players in the proper way, this can enhance both their career trajectories.

The coach-athlete relationship theme helped reflect the concept of athletes being called up and sent down as the coaches are a focal point for information regarding being sent down or called up. The relationship an athlete has with a coach can be detrimental or productive in terms of an athlete's potential of being called up or sent down. In some cases, the coach-athlete relationship is crucial as both the coach and athlete would like to progress in their careers (i.e., AHL to NHL), however, sometimes a coach-athlete relationship can be a negative experience for an athlete dependent on past behaviours of the athlete (i.e., reputation). Athletes expressed the lack of transparency in their relationship with the coach was detrimental for the athlete and the organization, as this can influence collective efficacy (Jowett, Shanmugam, & Caccoulis, 2012). This theme helps capture the process of being called up and sent down as the coach-athlete relationship is crucial for both parties, the power dynamic between a coach and an athlete can enhance or destroy a career. This theme has overlapped with social support as a coach can be of support to athletes as they are called up or sent down.

### **Cluster 2 – External influences on professional career**

This cluster includes themes of business/ politics of professional hockey, environmental factors, and role change dependent on team. These themes are clustered together as these themes can be conceptualized as the outside factors that influence career potential.

***Business/Politics of Professional Hockey.*** The business of professional hockey is salient throughout each interview, as each situation may be different from athlete to athlete, the concept is applicable. These athletes have faced obstacles signing with a team and staying with that team

throughout the season, which in professional hockey tends to be difficult. Many times, it does not matter about the skill level an athlete has however many factors influence a player's job security such as contracts, salaries, transactions with other players, and in-house changes (i.e., management or coach change). The business of professional hockey is often referred to a '*numbers game*', meaning your talent or ability to play at a professional level is sometimes not enough; another perspective is, '*it's a job here*', meaning the environment of professional hockey is different compared to how an athlete perceived hockey to be before professional hockey (e.g., worldview of hockey has shifted). The athletes experienced this transition multiple times, however some athletes outlook on the transition is that it is a '*numbers game*', and no athlete referred to not being athletically proficient (Bloom, 1985) to compete at the level they were at. This could be understood through Goodman et al.'s (2006) key factors of transition, as an athlete utilized this phrase as a coping mechanism (self; ego) to deal with this adversity, they faced.

There is an underlying factor with each athlete as they have experienced being sent down due to causes outside of their control such as, '*a numbers game*'. This theme helps highlight that there is more to hockey at the professional level than just playing the game, there is a lot of movement behind the scenes that allows a player to stay on a team or to relocate/ be sent down to a different team. The concept that professional hockey is a '*business*' becomes obvious to athletes after the first encounter of being sent down. The first time an athlete is sent down is a pivotal moment in their professional career, as their perspective on hockey shifts towards understanding that this is a business, and this has the potential to hinder their self-confidence. This transition allowed athletes to understand the psychological characteristics that are needed

during this process (MacNamara et al., 2010a; 2010b). This is the beginning of the precariousness in individuals towards their so called '*love for the game*'.

***Environmental Factors.*** The environment that an athlete continued to be in has the potential to enhance their performance as well as diminish it overnight. Many athletes in this sample referred to professional hockey as you are on a team working together towards a common goal however the internal conflict created lasting damage for players. Two athletes expressed how the environment of the locker room can have a lasting impression on an individual as well as the team as a whole. Outside of the athletic context, as athletes are called up, they were placed in hotels for the time being, which created a sense of frustration in a few athletes as they are unable to cook for themselves. Athletes that are called up are usually placed within a hotel room with no kitchen and as the athlete experienced uncertainty on how long they will be called up for or what role they will fill, they are not in their routine of being able to cook for themselves, which forced them to eat food from an outside source (i.e., take out, restaurants, fast-food). Athletes are not given a timeline on how long they are called up for, which makes it difficult for athletes to make sense of their current environment and excel in the transition (Fiske, 2004). One athlete expressed his discomfort about living in a hotel, as he coped with his promotion to his affiliated team he struggled to adjust to the relocation of his home.

The environmental factors can influence an athlete's ability to perform and cope with adversity. This theme helped highlight that more factors influence an individual's performance other than skill/ability to perform. In some cases, the environmental factors can be a dressing room or living in a hotel and not being able to cook for themselves. This theme highlights that when an athlete is called up, an outsider's perspective does not see the living conditions they have to encounter while needing to perform optimally as well. These athletes went from the

comfort of their own home to now living in a hotel room while they are called up, which created discomfort (Fiske 2004; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Social support and environmental factors shared similarities as athletes coupled emotional support with the relocation to a hotel.

***Role Change Dependent on Team.*** Throughout the process of being called up and sent down, an athlete enters a new team dynamic with the possibility of filling a new role. Roles within sport pertain to the expectations that are held for an individual within their given team. These roles can be offered to an athlete formally (e.g., communicated from a coach) or informally (e.g., not communicated but inferred through interactions and or behaviours) (Mabry & Barnes, 1980). When considering team sports there are different roles for each athlete on the team such as in hockey, roles can range from a goal scorer or playmaker, which these athletes receive more popularity for the team's success (i.e., task-oriented role), a grinder/energy player, which is a player who receives little playing time and their role is to focus on hard work and physical forechecking (i.e., auxiliary task-oriented role), leadership roles, which can be perceived as the captain or informal mentors, and social-oriented roles (e.g., social organizer) (Benson, Surya, & Eys, 2014). The player's in this sample express similar experiences as they are called up the roles they once had (i.e., goal scorer or 'go-to' player) tend to change to a grinder role or a role where they have limited ice time. One athlete expressed how he was called up and he was placed in a situation where he was able to continue with his goal-scorer role (task-oriented role) and this assisted him in gaining more confidence in performance. When athletes were sent down, although there were emotions such as disappointment, they found a sense of happiness as they were able to step back into their prior role with their former team such as goal-scorers and or formal and informal mentors (i.e., task-oriented, leadership roles, and social-oriented role) (Benson et al., 2014).

The theme of role change while being called up or sent down emphasized that most athletes that are called up are placed in a situation that tended to be unfamiliar to them. They went from a point scorer to a fighter/ 'grinder', where many athletes can struggle with this internal transition (point scorers consume a lot of the fandom and spotlight where a grinder does not receive this, they receive little to no spotlight however they play a crucial role in a team environment). This role change for an athlete can cause internal conflict, which may influence their performance on the ice. This theme helped capture that although it is great to be called up, it can be detrimental to an athlete's development as a player, and as they are sent down to their former team a sense of happiness or relief is apparent for them. Throughout the interviews, it is clear there is precariousness with being called up as well as being sent down. As an athlete is called up, the emotional experience is constantly positive however the role they are filling may have been detrimental. On the contrary, when an athlete is sent down, the emotional experience may be negative however there are some positives to this as they go back to their original role (i.e., goal scorer; Benson et al., 2014), which can help an athlete develop their psychological characteristics (MacNamara et al., 2010a; 2010b) and help rebuild their identity (Brewer et al., 1993).

### **Cluster 3 – Interpretation of experiences**

This cluster includes themes of metaphors of experience and romanticizing of professional hockey. These themes are coupled together as they both involve the interpretation of the athlete's personal experience, which is often times not available to the outsider realm of knowledge.

*Metaphors of experiences in sport.* Throughout each interview, metaphors were used to describe experiences these athletes have encountered thus far in their careers. In sport, metaphors

are a part of an athletes' understanding of themselves and the interaction they have with their environment, which they used metaphors to describe their experience (Gillham & Stone, 2020; Gretton, Blom, Hankemeier, & Judge, 2020; Hanin & Stambulova, 2002). A few athletes experienced transitions within their hockey careers before their professional career, similar to one athlete expressed a trade at the major junior level, *'Hurt a lot to be traded and not viewed as a piece that could help the team win. But then it actually came full circle sort of speak in [MAJOR JUNIOR TEAM] as we actually ended up winning that year'*. This athlete experienced this transition prior to his professional career, which allowed him to develop insights on how to handle transitions within hockey.

When athletes described their call-up experiences, they reference to, *'walking on eggshells'* or *'not wanting to step on anyone's toes'* or *'living the dream'* or *'you're on cloud nine'*. While athletes are called up to a new team, they do not want to be the athlete to disrupt the team culture or any of the athlete's performance routines. They wish to become part of the team to stay there permanently as it is closer to their dream of playing in the NHL.

When athletes' discussed experiences being sent down or dealing with adversity throughout their careers, one athlete referred to, *'being on an island'*, meaning an athlete felt a sense of loneliness however hockey is a team sport, which may cause some mental distress which partially supports Brown and Potrac (2009) findings of deselected athletes experiencing psychological disturbances upon deselection. This athlete also referred to when they are sent down, they must be able to, *'flip your brain'*, to focus on the next game as they are going to a lower league the last thing they wish is to underperform in a lower league. Also, as athletes are sent down communication with the coaches varied as for one athlete, he urged the need for transparency in order to perform optimally, *'you need transparency for the players to come out*

*of their brain' or 'They were hemming and hawing as different injuries were popping up'... or 'I think there's a lot of hemming and hawing or beating around the bush from a metaphor standpoint on the whole situation',* where on the other hand, one athlete expressed that production as an athlete can alter that experience, *'You just kind of shake hands when you leave and come and get back to work and as long as you're producing what you're supposed to be producing there's no real blink of an eye.'* Sometimes when an athlete is sent down, they may feel a sense of regret or begin to doubt their performance during the time they were up, similar to this athlete as he states, *'It kind of felt like I left something on the table there so to speak'* and as athletes start to perform with their previous team sometimes emotions may arise from their past transitions such as, *'it's something I am upset about a little bit but it's not something I try to sweep under the rug'.*

When athletes discussed the process of being sent down and called up one athlete stated, *'Your stomach feels full, like when you work so hard and you get that callup and you're in the NHL, it's just this feeling of where you're on top of a mountain where you've been climbing for so long and it feels like you belong there... Then being sent down, it's like you're on the other side of the mountain'.* Or *'Being able to turn the page and move on, and sort of make your miens with whatever happened and lay it to rest and not constantly be hung up on it or let it hang over your shoulders and letting that experience spill into other things you're moving on to.'*

The metaphors that athletes expressed throughout each interview captures a vivid picture of what it is like to be aware of their lived experience. These metaphors allow the researcher to move past a brief description of the concept as each athlete uses different metaphors throughout. As an athlete used metaphors to describe their experience this is expressing their conceptual knowledge about it and expressing how they have compartmentalized it. As an athlete is called

up, they tend to use positive and direct metaphors such as, *'living the dream' or 'on cloud nine'*, which make it very easy to understand how powerful and impactful this transition is for them. As athletes are, *'living the dream'*, they are also, *'walking on eggshells'*, while they entered a new dressing room with a new team. While being sent down, athletes can perceive it to be a more negative experience such as, *'being on an island' and 'flip your brain'* as it can be a lonely experience while trying to quickly become ready for the next game with a different team. The polarity in metaphors created an interesting finding for the literature such as the use of eggshells captured a lived experience of precarity for athletes. Metaphoric statements that express this precarious feeling created an understanding of how the athlete experiences a transition. The metaphors athletes used was dependent on what situation they were placed in and if they expected it or not. If an athlete had the psychological characteristics needed to handle a transition (MacNamara et al., 2010a: 2010b), the metaphors used were optimistic in nature. The support and strategies athletes used to handle this transition influenced the metaphors used as every athlete utilized emotional support but not everyone had good experiences with coaching staffs, which resulted in metaphors about, *'there's a lot of hemming and hawing or beating around the bush'* (Goodman et al., 2006).

***Romanticizing of professional hockey.*** The outsider's perspective on professional hockey tends to be inflated with a luxurious lifestyle, where most of the athletes this is not always the case. As an athlete experiences transitions within their career their lifestyle also changes, where an athlete may get used to the luxury of flying to games then they are sent down and shift to traveling by bus and sometimes those bus trips are overnight. At the NHL level, professional chefs are at the arena around the clock making sure that each athlete is eating the proper nutrition to perform at an optimal level consistently, as an athlete may be sent down this

service tends to dissolve. Individuals may romanticize about how *'easy'* or how *'good'* professional hockey players have it, what they do not know is the sacrifices many of them have made to get to where they are and the daily battles they overcome. Many European athletes do not see their families or loved ones the entire season (6-10 months), which international athletes must be able to adapt to the culture of North America and this can be difficult for some athletes (Schinke, Blodgett, McGannon, & Ge, 2016). There is also the possibility that some athletes are not able to afford to play professional hockey.

Romanticizing about professional hockey is apparent throughout all interviews as what a fan or an outsider perceives to be the life of a professional hockey player tends to be unbalanced by creating precariousness. This theme reflects the overall experience of being called up and sent down as an athlete can go from living a luxurious lifestyle with the airplane travel, daily cooking from chefs to overnight bus trips across the country where you are on your own for food. This may not be a big deal from an outsider's perspective but when you need your body to optimally perform every game or else your job is on the line, these small details matter. This helps capture that although being called up is great for athletes as they are playing professional hockey and life should be great, there is a high level of precarity of professional hockey. Individuals outside of the culture of hockey do not understand the precariousness or lack of luxury lifestyle athletes need to undergo to accomplish their dreams of playing professional hockey.

The themes help articulate the factors that an athlete experiences throughout being called up and sent down. The athletes in this sample have differing perspectives on their hockey career, while there are many similarities when it comes to this transition. The first time each athlete experienced this transition was a pivotal moment in their career as they understood the business of professional hockey, which throughout each interview athletes expressed a difference in tone

from talking about hockey at a minor hockey level to a professional level. These themes overlapped each other as social support had similarities with environmental factors and coach-athlete relationships. The themes created have a connection to larger concepts, for example, mindfulness is related to coping skills as the few athletes who participated in mindfulness were better equipped to handle the precariousness of professional hockey compared to others that were unable to deal with that uncertainty. Themes such as mental distress, social support, and environmental factors have a association with the precarity of professional hockey, as this is apparent as the first time an athlete is sent down, they experienced the world around them as a romanticized bubble, then that bubble is popped once they are sent down, which jump-started the precariousness in the athletes.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of professional hockey players being called up and sent down in an organization. Through the elaboration on the themes developed from the patterns discerned within and across each interview, it is evident that there are a lot of factors that influence the perception of a transition for athletes. As each athlete encounters transitions differently, there is no right way to excel in a transition but there are some aspects to consider from these themes that have allowed these athletes to enhance their situation. From a practical standpoint, MPCs can have an influential role in an athlete's ability to become resilient in this specific process through educating athletes on mindfulness and assist the coaching staff in regard to communication. An MPC educating athletes on mindfulness may influence an athlete's well-being and performance, and their role change as they are called up or sent down, which all influences their experience as an athlete. An MPC educating coaches about

proper communication with athletes may reduce the uncertainty that an athlete experiences, which may positively influence their performance and enhance the coach-athlete relationship.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to consider that may contribute to the findings of this current study. The sample size is relatively similar to other qualitative studies regarding transitions with athletes (Bruner et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2017; Pummell et al., 2008), the culture of hockey tends to be close-knit (Botterill, 2004), which resulted in a low response rate (six participants). This study only explores being sent down and called up through the lens of that athlete, which is important to understand but understanding how the coaching staff and other key informants perceive this transition can be valuable. This study only explored this transition at one point in the season (i.e., February-March), which can present different findings if multiple interviews could be completed. The findings from this study can be applied to other sports that utilize a developmental or affiliated team structure such as NBA, MLB, and MLS, but they will be difficult to apply findings to sports that do not utilize that structure (e.g., tennis). This study explored the lived experiences of being called up and sent down, but it fails to look at minor details that may influence a transition such as an athlete's social identity. Social identity is the strength to which individuals will identify with a sport team, which has important implications for athletes' cognitions, affect, and behaviour (Bruner, Dunlop, & Beauchamp, 2014; Rees, Haslam, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2015). This attribute has significant implications for athletes as a stronger social identity is positively associated with team outcomes (Murrell & Gaertner, 1992) and individual outcomes such as initiative, self-worth, commitment, perceived effort, and personal and social skills (Bruner, Balish, et al., 2017; Martin, Balderson, Hawkins, Wilson, & Bruner, 2017).

**Recommendations for Future Research.** As the concept of being called up or sent down in professional hockey has little to no research, there are many options for future research ideas. Based on the themes discussed earlier future research can include the practice of mindfulness and its influence on professional hockey player's career and well-being. This can be an interesting area to investigate as the athletes within this sample express the capabilities mindfulness can have on their athletic careers and well-being away from the arena. Athletes who were more mindful within this sample were able to articulate their experiences fluently and portrayed emotional intelligence. This could be explored through a longitudinal study on athletes experiencing this transition from a variety of sports (i.e., soccer, football, baseball) through semi-structured interviews on each transition they experience, utilizing multiple interview points throughout the season. Another area that would be interesting to research is the impact that role change within a team dynamic can be for an athlete. Changing roles within a team was a common pattern with all athletes, as they were called up the role of being a '*goal scorer*' quickly changed to a '*grinder*' (i.e., task-oriented, leadership roles, and social-oriented role) (Benson et al., 2014), which accompanies different responsibilities on the ice. Although, individual perceptions of their role on a team does not affect the perception of collective efficacy (Leo, González-Ponce, Sánchez-Miguel, Ivarsson, & García-Calvo, 2015) exploring the influence role change on an individual's experience during a transition is a possible area for future research.

From a coach's perspective, it would be interesting to research the different perspectives of being called up and sent down by looking at how an athlete perceives the transition as well as the coaching staff that initiated it. The coach-athlete relationships found in this study lacked transparency during the loaning process, which negatively influenced athletes in this sample as that experience does not include active ingredients (Jowett, 2017). It would be interesting to

explore what a coach tells an athlete and to see if the process of giving this information changes from athlete to athlete. In order to research this, a researcher can interview an athlete who is sent down/called up and interview the coaching staff and compare the findings to see if there is a disconnect or if they are congruent. This study could include multiple point interviews throughout the season as athletes are loaned out. These interviews could explore how a coach tries to enhance the active ingredients of a good quality coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2017). For example, if a coach withheld information about a player being sent down, would this help or hinder performance? If the athlete already knew he was going to be sent down (i.e., normative transition; Schlossberg, 1984; Sharf, 1997) will performance increase because his anxiety levels decreased? Contrary to that, if an athlete whom is called up and they become injured, does this automatically mean the athlete will be sent down? And how does this coach perceive an injured athlete?

Future research might also include a quantitative approach to exploring the themes and clusters developed in this study through a score-based survey tool to a larger sample of athletes. For example, if a future study were to look at transitions and athletic identity, they can use the Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ; Schlossberg, 1993) and Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). The TCQ is a 45-item self-reported questionnaire involving subscales of how an individual sees the transition they are facing, personal characteristics they bring to a transition, help from others, and how they usually cope with transitions. The AIMS is a 10-item instrument that measures the exclusivity that an individual identifies within the athletic role. Other explorations might include developing a screen for athletes who might show tendencies towards mindfulness or distress so that interventions could be planned early and other

forms of coping with distress might be nurtured. There is also the potential for developing mentoring relationships between teammates.

### **Conclusion**

This study has revealed that hockey players are more than their roles, are expressive and reflective in intriguing and thoughtful ways, and manage distress with differing strategies and with varying degrees of success. Being sent down and being called up are experiences that are more common than the glorious success stories of hockey lore and this study has revealed that these experiences, far from being mundane and unimportant, are the very texture of the fabric of our national game.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

**Informed Consent Form**

Date: October 31, 2019

Project Title: '*Sent down? Called up?*': Exploring the roller coaster of loans and re-assignments in professional hockey

Principal Investigator (PI): Dr. Philip Sullivan, Professor

Department of Kinesiology

Brock University

(905) 688-5550 ext. 4787; [psullivan@brocku.ca](mailto:psullivan@brocku.ca)

Student Principal Investigator (SPI)

Bryan McLaughlin/ Masters Student

Department of Kinesiology

Brock University

**INVITATION**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to explore professional hockey players' lived experiences with loaning in organizations.

**WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant you will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview with Bryan McLaughlin that will be audio-recorded. Participation will take approximately 30 to 75 minutes of your time that will occur over Skype or in-person, in which we will discuss your experience(s) of being loaned and reclaimed in professional hockey.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Possible benefits of participation include informing policy makers, coaches and athletes of key characteristics (i.e., mental skills) in making this process optimal. There's potential of a risk associated with participation if an athlete feels uncomfortable sharing an experience they had with their sport. Athletes will be notified that their participation is completely voluntary and if they wish to withdraw from the study it will not have any negative implications. Athletes experiencing uncomfortable feelings during the interview will be given mental health resources (e.g., ConnexOntario, Crisis and Telehealth Ontario).

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All participants will remain confidential to the research team and there will be no identifiers in the final report in order to remain confidential (i.e. pseudonyms will be used for final report). Data collected during this study will be stored on a password-protected laptop in a locked cabinet when not in use. Data will be kept for 5 years after which time data will be destroyed (October 2025). Access to this data will be restricted to Bryan McLaughlin and Dr. Philip Sullivan.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available by email request to any of the participants in the study.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Bryan McLaughlin ([bm18gq@brocku.ca](mailto:bm18gq@brocku.ca)) or (519) 830-5649 and Dr. Philip Sullivan ([psullivan@brocku.ca](mailto:psullivan@brocku.ca)) or (905) 688-5550 ext. 4787 using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University **19-140-SULLIVAN**. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Audio Recording

I agree to the audio-recording of my interview.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Introduction

Before we get started, I just want to restate the purpose of this research. The purpose of this study is to explore professional hockey players' lived experiences with loaning in organizations. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdrawal at any point without consequences. When we are discussing your experience(s) try to recall the most recent transaction with a team. If you need clarification on any questions or want to make extra comments on concepts, feel free to do so.

### Demographics

I just have a few quick demographic questions I need to ask.

- How old are you?
- Where do you play currently? Level?
- How long have you been playing hockey? Did or do you play other sports?
- What position do you play?

### Introductory Questions

1. Please tell me about your involvement in hockey at the minor hockey level.
2. Junior level?
3. USports or College level?
4. Professional level?
5. Please tell me about the transition from College or USport to the Professional level?
6. During your Junior and or College/ USport career, what transitions did you experience? (e.g., trades, relocation, loaned, deselection).
7. Please tell me about those in detail (length of time, frequency)

This section was to gain an understanding of your sporting background and your experience with career transitions earlier in your career.

Is there anything you would like to add that was not covered to do with your minor hockey, Junior, and or College careers that was not discussed regarding transitions?

### Main Questions

Now we will discuss the process of being sent down and called up in professional hockey.

#### *Being called up experience*

1. Please tell me about your experience(s) of being called up?
2. Please tell me about the emotions were you feeling?
3. Please tell me about how dealt with this.
4. Please tell me about your support system throughout this.
5. How did they help?
6. Please tell me about what it is like at the rink.

7. Coaching staff interactions?
8. Teammate interaction?

*Being sent down experience*

9. Please tell me about your experience(s) of being sent down?
10. Please describe the emotions were you were experiencing?
11. Please tell me about how you dealt with this.
12. Please tell me about your support system throughout this.
13. How did they help or not help?
14. Please tell me about what it is like going a new rink.
15. Coaching staff interactions?
16. Teammate interactions?

*Coping/adaptation skills*

17. Please tell me about how you get through these processes. (mental skills, coping, adaptation strategies)
18. Please tell me about daily stressors you encountered and how did you deal with these.

*Narrative/ Critical incident Questions*

19. Please tell me about a memorable experience that was discouraging or disheartening. Please include details about other people, spaces, conversations, emotional experience. Anything that will bring me inside your experience.
20. Please tell me about a memorable experience that was uplifting or meaningful. Please include details about other people, spaces, conversations, emotional experiences. Anything that will bring me inside your experience.

*Overall Experience*

21. Please tell me about how this process impacts you as an individual?
22. As an athlete?

This section of was to gain an understanding of this process of a player being reassigned to a team or loaned out.

Is there anything that you would like to add to this section before we move on?

Any personal experiences that you want to provide to the research?

**Summary Questions**

I'm interested in trying to establish some of the best techniques and tips for athletes that may experience this transition in their career.

If you were able to advise an organization on this process what would you tell them?

If you were to notify an athlete on how to handle this situation, what would you say?

**Conclusion**

Thank you for participating in my research today, I would like to give you this opportunity to add any relevant information that we did not touch on today. If you wish to receive information on my findings you can leave your contact information with me and I will forward it to you. Thanks again.

## Appendix C: Recruitment E-mail

E-mail script

Hello,

My name is Bryan McLaughlin. I am a master's student at Brock University in the Kinesiology Department. I am completing my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Philip Sullivan on professional hockey players lived experience(s) being loaned and reclaimed in an organization. This research offers an opportunity to learn more about professional hockey players experience in this process as there is minimal research in this specific area.

Participation in this research would involve a one-on-one interview with Bryan McLaughlin over Skype or in-person in the later part of the hockey season (January-February). The interview would be recorded and remain confidential. You would be asked to talk about your experience with hockey, experience(s) with transitions and in particular your experience with being loaned and reclaimed. You are not required to share any experiences that are uncomfortable, and you are able to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

When we are finished with this study, we will share our research with the academic community, and with the hockey community, so that athletes and coaches are aware of key characteristics that assist in this process. There will be no identifiers (e.g., name, team name), so you will remain anonymous, and your information will remain confidential.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at (519) 830-5649 or at [bm18gq@brocku.ca](mailto:bm18gq@brocku.ca)